

VOICES AS ONE

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ABSTRACT

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At any given moment, a legion of warriors waits in my head, ready to express themselves. I tell their stories more readily than I tell my own; I send them on adventures more courageously; I let them love more honestly. Even in their darkest moments, I trust in them and cherish them more willingly than I do myself. They are the voices I wish I embodied, and they are the spirits I long to soar with. To give them the opportunity to live, if only for a little while, I write their stories—vignettes of lonely afternoons; the quiet, aching sigh of love songs (and anti-love songs, too). I give them pages to exorcise their demons or to embrace them. The voices collected here in poetry and prose are those belonging to a young woman who wages her most articulate wars with a pen—these voices are mine.

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Foreword: An Interview with Myself

What first attracted you to writing, and in particular, to poetry?

Two events stand out vividly in my memory: for each moment, I know where I was sitting, what I was wearing, the rough threads of my family's old couch under my fingers, and the way the floor seemed to thrum under my feet.

I was nine years old, watching movies on television one afternoon. Emma Thompson quarreled with Kenneth Branagh on the screen, trading gibes and crossing verbal blades with both merriment and the staccato cadence of wounded hearts. They swept past one another with rhythmic blows and subtly framed rhymes. I was in love at once with their language; I was nine years old and somehow understood their stories, their double-entendres, and I wanted to play with words as they did. It was a film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and I was in love with Shakespeare (Branagh, *Much Ado About Nothing*).

Three years later: sixth grade was a difficult transition for me. Language Arts had always been my favorite subject, and I was in the advanced class. But possibly for the first time ever, my teacher and I did not get along. Although I tried to put my best foot forward in her class by prioritizing her assignments and always actively participating in discussion, Mrs. K. never smiled at me, seemed dismissive of my remarks, and left feedback that was so dry and cutting on my essays that the words seemed almost snide in their severe, red ink. Several times I was sure I caught her glaring at me—then again, she seemed to glare at the other students, too. All through

elementary school, I had been teased for being a teacher's favorite, but now, in my most treasured class, I was concerned that not only was I not performing to standard, but that my teacher might actually dislike me.

Mrs. K. and I had a meeting one day after school, and I explained my fears to her. I wanted to know what I could do to change her mind about my potential and my work ethic, if it indeed needed changing. I *argued* with her that I was worth her time and consideration. She was amazed—struck silent for several moments. It turns out what I had thought was singular dislike for me was a general jaded feeling for all of her students; she had become accustomed to her sixth graders not caring much for the written word, nor for her. She had given up trying to inspire their respect, and settled for their fear of rebuke and poor grades, instead. I told her I liked her assignments, in spite of her. And in spite of *that* (or perhaps because of it), she developed a fondness for me. I shared my writing with her beyond what we were told to do in class; I shared with her my love of Shakespeare and poetry. I told her how much I loved the Naomi Shihab Nye poems she had shared with our class: a collection entitled *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*. I told her I wanted to be just like Ms. Nye.

Two months passed, and Mrs. K. invited Nye to visit the school and speak with the Language Arts students. I was star struck, climbing up the auditorium stage to meet a local hero. I clutched my copy of *Words* in my hands and, when it was my turn to meet her, enthused to Nye how much her prose poem *Yellow Glove* meant to me, how I read it over and over. I divulged to her that I wrote my own poetry, and I asked, *How can I grow up to do what you do?* She chatted graciously with me for several minutes, then provided her contact information: she wanted me to

send her my work—she would be happy to read it and offer her thoughts any time. I could have died happily right there. It would have been alright; it felt much like Nye's words: *Part of the difference between floating and going down* (Nye 116).

As you grew more interested in poetry, which themes, forms, and styles resonated with you most? Are there any poets in particular whose work speaks to how you choose to write? How were you able to identify pieces that struck a chord with you?

One of the most prominently affecting themes in work I read as time passed was that of a tenuous grasp on (or inverted relationship to) religion and spirituality. I felt a kinship with pieces that either blatantly or subtly experimented with the role religion played in one's life as compared to familial and societal expectations.

Growing up unbaptized with a Catholic mother and non-practicing Protestant father, I often felt out of place and adrift among my family and friends. They attended churches and bible study groups; they counted rosaries. I felt as if I watched their furor of belief and the comfort they took in it from beyond a glass window, each time I attended worship with friends, sang hymns and praise with them side by side, arms raised high or hands clasped with neighbors as the words made hollow shapes in my lungs. I wondered how great of a sinner I was for not truly belonging there, as they seemed to. When my aunt brought a rosary to me from Spain, blessed by a bishop and pressed with the scent of roses, I wondered, *Is it wasted on me?*

As a result of this secret inner turmoil, perhaps the most formative poem I read in my teenage years was “The Second Coming,” wherein William Butler Yeats subverts the idea of Christ’s return to earth to restore order and true believers to their home on earth (*New Jerusalem Bible*, Revelation 19:14) as the moment further chaos and horror are unleashed upon mankind. This subversion is especially poignant as it was written in reflection of World War I. This war was the first event of its magnitude and a time during which the population of the world was struck by uncertainty and, perhaps more than ever before, the fear of mortality. As an Irish poet, Yeats was also enormously impacted by the turmoil of the Irish War of Independence in the immediate wake of WWI—this next war began in 1919, the same year he published “The Second Coming.” He uses this poem to indulge his darker moods and apocalyptic theories, illustrating the fate of a world that cannot recall its own history and thus can never learn from it:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer; (Yeats)

Here, a *gyre* represents to Yeats a cyclical period in history approximating 2000 years; apocalypse believers like Yeats associate the end of times with an approach around 2000 years after the birth of Jesus Christ (Hirschberg 305). Yeats describes a spiraling falcon, an evolved and accurate hunter, and a bird of prey that can be taught to seamlessly obey a human master. This advanced creature has now drifted so far away from the falconer and his waiting arm that he can no longer hear the call to return home; he is lost in the chaotic arc of his own flight.

Upon my initial reading of the poem, I was first struck by the closing lines:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (Yeats)

I thought about the terrible mystery Yeats leaves us with—as we are all left at the end of things, whether they “fall apart” (Yeats) or not: alone with the fearsome unknown—but as years passed, I began to revisit the poem with a greater understanding for and kinship with the opening. I was the falcon, I realized; I was untethered to my spiritual and natural origins, and even through my search for them I doubted I should recognize them if they crossed my path. Here, I felt, was my greatest perceivable “sin”—the absence of faith—and I would come to spend a great deal of energy over the coming years addressing the consequences. It becomes a dominant symbolism throughout my enclosed anthology.

Two pieces in this thesis that deal with these themes (and perhaps even a fractured cousin of Yeats’ form) are “the (last) coming” and “not those who fell.” While a great deal of my work falls under the umbrella of free verse, these two poems that address sin, abandonment, apocalyptic fallout, and inversion of religious imagery obey form. The first follows a strict meter and the second uses phrasal repetition. In “the (last) coming,” the first two lines of each stanza hammer a war-drum-like rhythm in alternating broken trochaic tetrameter and unbroken iambic tetrameter. In “not those who fell,” I used a similar approach to the first line of each stanza with a broken trochaic trimeter, rather than war drums. These three full beats lent themselves to the guiding voice of the poem, advising the reader to trust neither their instincts nor who and what

they are taught to learn from in the typical Christian religious hierarchy: angels, the Holy Bible, and Heaven itself.

While the thematic influences from Yeats are evident in each piece (down to an outright homage in the first poem's title) I chose to take the consequences of what happens when "things fall apart" (Yeats) a step further. In "the (last) coming" we do not deal with a terrible mystery on the horizon; instead, Bethlehem has already burned and God, Himself, is proclaimed dead. We confront demons who are, in fact, fellow victims and sufferers, while angels are revealed for their true selves as those who celebrate the end of worlds, free of expectation.

Standard Christian theology regards fallen angels as those who are cast out of Heaven for committing some egregious sin and are subsequently banished to Hell, often to exist as demons and devils. It is a punishment to leave, not a choice. In "not those who fell," the subject advises the reader that there is, indeed, a spiritual truth to be found, but it does not come from commonly indoctrinated origins. The subject warns the reader away from typical religious sources of wisdom, exposing them for dead and empty things; he even warns the reader away from trusting him/herself in the reader's earnestness to ascend. By the last stanza we abandon all patterns of rhythm and repetition in favor of a truncated two-line proclamation: the angels who purposefully rebelled and abandoned Heaven are the true oracles and heroes of the story.

The purposeful structure in each of these pieces, as well as the instances in which their meters are deliberately broken, evoke the rigid, often intimidating mood I encountered growing up as I explored various outlets of faith—like a formal society I could never quite belong to, beset with

too many rules I could not understand and thus constantly struggled against. The rhythms used in these pieces are not soothing, but almost cold and quietly forbidding: do not tread here, do not speak there, abandon your hope and, most of all, your preconceptions. Faith, itself, is a rough beast, and we may never truly know its form until it is too late.

My next influence is significantly less formal, but it is perhaps the most colorful and chaotic source of inspiration I encountered in my many years of appreciating both poetry and prose: the Beat Movement. One of my most tangible memories of a formative experience in my early adult years was visiting the Beat Poetry Exhibition in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin in March of 2008. Although I had previous, vague, preliminary exposure to brilliant minds like that of Allen Ginsberg, this exhibit permitted me to see many of these poets' pieces in their true, original form, down to the original, aging paper they were scrawled upon. It was there that I first encountered the collage work of a poet I had never heard of before, Jess (Burgess Collins). His use of color, spatial juxtaposition, and true *physicality* spoke to how I related to my own writing as well as others'. I experience poetry in three, if not four, dimensions, in direction and in time: I experiment with spacing as well as punctuation to guide the reader to do the same, so that s/he can follow my words across the page like choreography through spacetime. I found a special kinship with the tumultuous dance that is Jess's 1952 collage, *Open Mouthed but Relaxed* (see fig. 1):

Reflections on Photography. In this book he examines the sensation he experiences when studying certain photographs, and he determines that the pieces which pierce or wound him are those which resonate with him most strongly over time (Barthes 27).

I realized I was wounded by this line in Jess's piece. Further still, I realized why I felt wounded: I felt that the line was me; I was the ghost.

I incorporated it into my poem "state of zero" with another homage, this time even more direct, including a dedication to Jess beneath the title. While many of my pieces take the voice of a *persona*, the last half of this poem depicts a swift coming of my own age and loss of innocence, quite directly. I was a dedicated ballet student from the age of three up until early adulthood. While ballerinas initially strike the audience as effortless, graceful creatures on the stage, studying ballet was ultimately another form of my search for guidance, control, and faith. Ultimately, I found no higher truths in ballet; neither did I find a society to which I could belong forever. What I found was myself, and copies of myself, that would live upon the stage and then expire. I am reminded of a passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare 5.5.26-30)

Jess's work harkens back to my original Shakespearean inspiration, with important variations not only in structure but also in tone that speaks to me. In one concise piece, he explores the heights of joy, the thrill of carelessness, and the depths of secret sorrow as if a chorus of many voices coalesces into one chaotic din. The collage format he chooses brings a sense of both urgency and transience to the work; as opposed to a formal sonnet cited classically and in the same structure throughout the ages, this piece is like a photograph. I came away with the notion that the voices on the page would have an entirely different message the next day, if I were to capture them again.

The use of spacing in my own poem signifies a sudden crescendo of excitement in the search for similar voices and selves, the euphoria of discovery, followed by a gradual decrescendo until the cycle repeats and cuts away at the end, presumably to go on forever. Each version of these selves was slightly different than the last, painstakingly crafted. It echoed my everyday life. Each day at school, at a social gathering, or with family, I turned a page of myself and started over, still looking for my prime. I tried exploring different interests, making friends with new people, but never really introducing my true self to anyone because I had yet to meet her. *No, today, that conversation I had, that wasn't the real Margot. She danced expertly, but she didn't quite fit in her skin. Let's try something else.* Each day it became harder, like dying, and resurrecting myself again. Although structurally very different, I still found Jess's collage to be representative of a search, as well—specifically a call to kindred, an echo of, “Is there anybody out there?” in each splash of bold font. More to the point, it is an invitation. I treat my own work as an invitation, too.

Another prolific poet from the Beat Movement whose work had a profound effect on me after visiting the 2008 exhibit was Allen Ginsberg. Like Jess, the structures he both observed and broke reflected how I tampered with form in my writing at that time, and I proceeded to do more of this over the next few years. I found a kinship with how Ginsberg treated punctuation and negative space in his verse, as if to follow the natural breath, a confident mantra, or a quiet aside. As I read more of his work, one piece that obeyed these peaks and troughs in structure and rhythm particularly influenced me: “Wild Orphan.”

In “Wild Orphan” Ginsberg comes straight out of the gate with indentations and line breaks to establish an almost nursery-rhyme-like cadence:

Blandly mother
takes him strolling
by railroad and by river
—he's the son of the absconded
hot rod angel—
and he imagines cars
and rides them in his dreams, (Ginsberg)

It is the use of hyphens here that I find most familiar. I make common use of them in my own work. I use hyphens and parentheses in pieces like “rain touched” and “Death of the Lovesick” to emphasize asides or secret conversations with the self or with the reader. Ginsberg appears to impart a salacious secret or fantasy to the reader about his subject in “Wild Orphan.” That secret

once again strikes a chord with my fascination of one's true origin (here, the subject's father), and either a real and tangible or imagined distance from it. My own use of hyphens, parentheses, and even indentation in the pieces mentioned above highlight a confessional tone, sometimes an admission of guilt or weakness, spaced often like aborted breaths of air.

While half in the form of persona or the "supposed I" and half in true confessional "personal I," the entire work is a collection of voices calling out and coming clean. These voices, like myself, may yet be adrift and searching. We all have work left to do; we may never be fully at home in our skin or find an anchor in faith.

But to search is a start.

love affair

my dark, disheveled romance with the sound
continues in the corner of the club
that nameless Other World
well-worn and leather-bound:
all shadow dust and mystery

we've been dancing and dancing and
setting fires and
seeing stars and
giving way to the fullness of ourselves
where we are one
and two
and one again

we are dangerous
we are a universe

wherefore art thou

winter, why so discontent
world is still and white air fills our lungs
pray, give me leave awhile
this is the time of wishes left unsung

so, winter, slumber on
keep your secrets closer to your heart
it's spring who begs to steal
the intimacy of our glacial art

cheerless, would I sing
oppressive wonders of the spring—

give me my winter here

come here to me (thunder children)

come here to me, he says
and I pour over him like rain
we're Thunder and Lightning
always crashing, creating
he never says, *come here to me*
never says, *come here*
so I fall down now in this *Never*, down

and
down

been waiting
for him to crash like this
been waiting
to devour him

see him as he once was
the soul that he denies
the silver in his eyes is less clouds, more sky
he's still a boy

we're thunder children
wild-eyed and flashing bright
catching ourselves in that summer rain when
we knew no other
no world but this

we're old and broken
tired-eyed and razor-edged
catching ourselves in yesterday's glimmer where
he's still a boy
I'm still the rain

it's dark and I've been waiting
he says, *come here to me*
he says, *I've been waiting, too*
godless children of the storm, we

kiss gold skin to taste the sun
watch dark eyes to feel the night
hold warm hands to pretend forever

state of zero

(in memory of Jess, 1923-2004)

bring all the color,
all the life,
all the beauty back to zero

make it bigger, now
faster, now
smoother, now
brighter, now
 odd angles Shining Glorious
 and
then through Fire breathe
 the Ice
that dresses Winter all in
 pretty, pretty lace
with tendrils turning like her
 ballerina shoes
twirl, twirl, twirl in the company of bats
 and like *a carefully rejuvenated ghost*
bring all the beauty back to zero
again—again—again—

never ever 64

these are the places that hurt this is where the angels fly I don't care if you want me to walk the straight line I am my own and if you realized dear Mr. Livingston that I was once a politician in my day oh yes you heard me and so did the lions and the lemurs and the butterflies they never keep their roars dull no it's always loud loud life loud knife loud did you know I had this dream where everyone was running from the end and it came like a wave and a flood and a big rocket ship and I never knew I had it in me till that day to spill blood but when I did there were stars these are the places that hurt this is where the angels fly

and there was that one time I walked the plank and you dove after me and we drowned but we wanted to drown so everything was all right everything is never all right everything is nothing is everything is not one fucking thing and I wish I had known what to say that day god came to me and commanded me to make him a sandwich did you know that sandwiches are metaphors what's a metaphor you say I say it is a lie disguised as truth I say it is a sky painted green when the blue and yellow kiss and you say I may be a little crazy but the numbers never lie and the numbers are grim it's raining 42 and sometimes 71 why won't it ever rain 64 I ask of you because 64 has a square root that isn't so intimidating as 3 since 3 is magic and I'm scared I have no magic left in me or I'm scared I never did

is it weird to think that I might have done better if I had gone down that road or that one or even that one but not this one and Mr. Livingston you really shouldn't tackle global warming just yet because there is that matter of 65,000 homeless people living on your sidewalk you might want to help them first or feed them they look hungry but I wouldn't give them sandwiches those lying metaphor sandwiches maybe you could feed them technology and they could feed you trees because when you think about it you have way too many homeless people on your sidewalk and never enough shade for them your homeless tree ratio is bleak sir bleak but let's move on

there is need to talk of red and yellow killed a fellow and around midnight I saw stars crying as they fell and around noon I saw sparklers it was much too early for sparklers not only was it not independence day but it wasn't even dark and you know that sparklers and glimmers and little lost twinkles they are better seen at dusk or maybe when the world goes blue yes blue blue blue is a nice color it's a good conversationalist and was amiable enough when it advised me not to wear that dress to please you since you were blind and when I kissed you I could taste that you were taken and Mr. Livingston I never have known how to tell you that these are the places that hurt this is where the angels fly

Spring and Winter, at War

the spring, he claws at me with golden talons
his lips bud with the promise of a kiss
but my soul, she is the winter
she carries me in swirls of grey
and blends the black of night into the day
in her arms I safely weep
and escape the clutches of spring's waning promise
that empty promise
that budding promise of a paradise swept away

I saw archer at the airport

grown up legs are tree trunk tall
we wind through them as through a jungle
wrapped safe in the vines of mother's arms.

"archer," father calls. "it's time to go. come, boy, come."

to his knee we cling whereby we swing
from this jungle to the next
navigating a gully of laces and toes
of slipknots and bows
and footsteps men hope to follow.

She is Called “Mother Spirit On Her Back”

I will carry her on my back.

I have fortified my walls and I can lift her weight, I can cover her.

But I wonder what will become of me when I have avenged,
when I have covered and lifted,
when I have carried us so far away from him
that he is less than a spot in the darkness of my closed eye.

If he is so small to me, I will be so small to him.

We are so small, we avengers.

the (last) coming

oil on walls and mirrors and
we drew (in) blood to wash away
the angels
coming for our heads

demons with their eyes of coal
say ours is not the (god) we think
the maker
never looking down

hands and feet of humans bound
think no more will (we) come again
the sinners
laugh among the graves

worlds are ending, now it's ours
and all we love and (trust) is black
and burning
smells of Bethlehem

why now, we ask the angels
why us, we beg the demons

and the demons answer
we are tired
and the angels sing out
god is dead

not those who fell

seek not out the light
between the floorboards and the thick expanse of night
as you go fumbling softly up to heaven
with your sleeves too long
and your eyes so keen

seek not out the truth
in sounds of falling feathers as angels flutter
back to earth beyond you spiraling
with their tongues cut out
and their hearts gone still

seek not out the word
from lips that willing part or books that always bind
for these are empty hand-me-downs
with their legends too old
and their bones so hollow

do not ask the angels who fell
(ask those who fucking leaped)

So Clouds Collide

Into the gauzy atmosphere go thoughts of every man
Where plundered are they by the winking stars
The wishes sent, devoured then; and heaven's gaping maw
There goes to battle under cry of Mars
So clouds collide in mind and eye of god and man alike
If only to clap hands 'round earth's desires
And poets bleed their ink while all the sages map the end
But better know the clouds: still heav'n aspires

Pillow Talk

Sometimes in the morning I stay
in bed with your pillow.
I have conversations with your
imprint and it tells me
you dreamed last night.

I ask after this dream, I say, "Was he happy?"
And the pillow replies, it says, "Yes, with Her."

Down feathers everywhere. I go snow-swimming but it smells of you.

Sometimes in the afternoon I lay
asleep, still in bed.
I have conversations with my
devils and they tell me
I ought to drop your nicotine.

I reason with these devils, I say, "It could be worse."
And the devils reply, they say, "Look who you're talking to."

Cloud-drunk falling. I try waking but the sheets hold me down.

Sometimes in the evening I wait
in bed again, or maybe I never left.
I had a conversation with our
empty table and it tells me
you were never coming anyway.

I offered it a meal, I said, "Will you keep it warm?"
And the table replied, it said, "Honey, quit your waiting."

Cold heart left over. I think, *Tomorrow*, but I quit that, too.

Death of the Lovesick

stop fighting
I'm only trying to tie your laces
before I send you off with *goodbye* and *have fun* and
do me a favor, don't get killed (again).
what if they couldn't bring you back (again) or what if
they just decided not to because
they're ~~Angelic~~ Demonic like that
and I hate them sometimes,
I really do.

stop fighting
I'm only trying to soak up the blood
and bite the bullets and be the decoy blazing fire
so don't give me your *but wait* and *I'm not worth it* and
I want you to live forever.
forever's your bag, you dig, and there's no way
in ~~Heaven~~ Hell I'm taking that
from you,
your precious self.

stop fighting
I'm only fading just a little
while we sit still in our golden underworld
with our *I love you* and *it's nice here* and
I'll miss you, you know.
it is nice and I *do* love and I *will* miss
you
 you
 you.
I'll be ~~Without~~ With you after
so (please, look, I said it)
stop fighting.

In the Gold Place (Thunder Children, Part Two)

You were sitting on the window sill,
all feline and frowning when I saw you that day.
It's your place, ground zero and grace,
I never know which one
until I see the way light hits your eyes.
Shadow once for Yes, twice for No, if you can hear me.
Yes, I said *hear* not *understand* because we both
know you understand it always, and so do I,
it's only a matter of whether we like to listen
over our own angry drums
or our own indifferent what-have-yous
or our own desperate whispers.
Your whisper *I love you*
and my whisper *Why should you*.
You think your hand on my wrist is some kind of
acceptable reply. I refuse to meet your eyes
and show you I was waiting for you.
My pulse betrays me anyway.
To all your gods and fallen angels, I say
Get out, there's no room in this church to be holy.
Give me one good reason not to
blacken our faces with clay like warriors
because we are ever waiting to strike each other
down and rise up again and
down and rise up again and
down and up and up again, giddy necromancers
fixated on *I don't want you after all* for the sake of being
born one more time.
Guilty of so much blood, it's under our tongues and our nails
and when the fuck were we ever clean or chaste
or small
or even lovely.
We don't live here in the gold place anymore,
I'm only visiting the children.

girl next door

hides her head in the dark
never feels right till the cold sets in
and the shivering starts
invites her monsters, come on, gets in
her midnight car
riding off into the graveyard now
where she buries the stars
light is dead when it gets here, you know
oh it travels so far
she's a cemetery sweeper these days
girl is always on par
with the shadowlings snarling to stay
in dreams kept in a jar

they call her azrael,
mab,
the girl next door.

Dusk World

Michael is music reinvented, mumbling incoherencies and prophecies – nonsense and riddles all at once. It is always dusk in this world. The glow is grey and pink with a breath of blue, like the stones of the walls surrounding the property, and the stones with which our house is built. Trees are dark silhouettes – Pines – they lengthen up and around us like guardians and eavesdroppers; they are the frame. All I can see is Michael walking away, watch his back as he looks over his shoulder at me. He is always lurching away, those shoulders hunched up around his ears, thin as branches, fading into the everdusk.

Trees Become the Neurons of the Wild

She said, “Dig up your roots, son. Don’t stagnate, don’t rot. Move, move into orbit.”

Well, what then of putting down roots like the heady dreamers say? Of making lives and breeding and forming rings upon rings of age as you expand into the sand. So I built my house around a moonlit oak tree, the tallest in its grove, young and proud and sturdy, ready to grow old with me. I carved my roof lovingly around its branches; I left room for him to shoot high and wide. Because shooting high and wide is what I was meant to do, too. And my branches, my leaves, like his, they are meant to connect with the air and stars and fingerling seasons that touch and change me, little wisps of breath and holding hands.

So it was I built my house around a moonlit oak tree, because that is what I was meant to do. But she told me, “Son, dig up your roots. There are no connections in the sand. Move, move into orbit.”

My tree heard her, and he soared up from beneath my floor boards and through my roof, pining for the moon.

I thought to myself as I held the ropes once bound with adoration to his trunk, ‘Perhaps a sunlit oak would have been better.’

My tree, he didn’t make it through my roof, for the sling that binds him to the pulsing chamber of my house still holds him fast. But he aims like a rocket for the space above, and the stars twinkle beneath the sky’s lascivious skirts at him, beckoning him forth. He strains at his ropes and his sling, and my house begins to tumble. The roots gone, the foundation caved in, my home will soon slide into earth’s gaping mouth, yawning expectantly. Earth will devour this foolish life and me with it, and I know it while I stare down into the waiting black abyss. I should

not have built my house around a tree like the heady dreamers say, putting down roots and breeding and forming rings upon rings of age.

I buried my roots too deep, hoping to find connections in the sand, and now I am bound to the earth while my tree rockets toward the wanton sky, the covetous moon.

nothing

something wicked
this way comes
and out of dust
we wake again
but nowhere no
and neverwhen
have we ever captured
misled hearts
you are the nest
i am the bird
let me leave you
so they can write us down
and remember all
our little nothings

In the Beginning There Was

He awoke in a great, dark nowhere. In the black stretches of some ineffable infinite, more of a notion than any physical place, he knew he was frozen somewhere between the beginning and the end. There was no concept of self, identity, or even Other. He understood neither what he was, nor what he was not, only that he was here. After an expanse of time he could not estimate, a voice spoke to him – not aloud, but as explicit thought. It might have even been his own mind awakening.

Hello, child. We have been waiting for you.

He wasn't certain whether he had his a voice of his own to speak with, or whether the sound that came next emerged from somewhere without as opposed to within.

"Am I late?"

On the contrary. You arrived as expected, for now it is your turn.

"I don't understand."

You have great work to do. You have come to us to learn.

He reached out into the dark, but felt nothing. "Will you tell me what I am?"

You are the vessel.

"This means I must carry something."

Oh, yes. You will carry that which is greatest, and most precious.

"What is it?"

Life into death, child. You will bear the Spirit.

He still didn't understand, so the voice began to elaborate. It explained to him that he was energy, manifested in the form of their choosing, this time in human likeness. Why human, he wondered? *Because, it said, the Spirit you are responsible for guiding is that of all the human race – the souls who are lost between life and death. Some understand them as ghosts, spirits who have lost their way and cannot comfortably settle into the ether. Into heaven or into hell, he asked? The voice seemed to smile at this; he felt the warmth of a distant fondness. That is how humans conceive of it, said the voice, and we let them. We even provide evidence in the form of what they call miracles so that they might believe. It is chiefly this belief that permits their souls to shed the skin of mortality and return to us – the One Spirit. They are our children, as were you, once.*

"I was human?"

Yes.

"What am I now?"

You are Nothing.

And so he came to know himself: nothing, a shell that once contained its own spirit, now empty to make room for the connection he would share with those wandering souls. He could live in the world if he chose, the voice explained. He would be given the means to evade mortal scrutiny so that he might travel untroubled, identifying lost souls and transporting them from one world to the next. He should not expect to live as other humans did. Not truly alive, he could not age, nor could he form the bonds of human love with much success. He was, after all, missing the soul he once had, the soul that had loved, and hated, and lost.

He settled into this strange half-existence, connected more with the dead than the living. He thought perhaps he should feel lonely, but at first he felt little more than a vague numbness.

It was when he began to have memories – memories he wasn't even sure were his own – that trouble arose. This was not part of the plan.

The Spirit grew angry.

In this Kingdom

We stare through the glare
and the lens flare across your face is
beautiful, beautiful
You are the shooting sun star before
the twilight comes to softly hum her lullaby

And everything is so bright I might
go blind or die or worse, lose you once again
to her, to her
Leave *her* and come with me
to the center of the earth

Where I can keep you always
in this kingdom, unrequited

into summer

lose our clothes in summertime
and in the oppressive air
lose ourselves to blue and red and
the gold in between

we share a word about lines
on paper and the things we forgot
to say when we were still
you and I and us and them

he loves a honey night
with a bottle and a drag and a stolen breath
where we curl into a secret
like little children hiding

I love unfinished skyways that reach out
into the atmosphere
then suddenly stop
like concrete hands searching

Jack Kelly

Every guy has a story, right. Could *pizazz-boom-pow* at you like an action film, could be boring as shit. But there's a story.

Jack Kelly has several. He can't seem to decide which life is his; he says he's lived a few of them.

Some people think it's because he's mostly insane – paranoid schizophrenia, possessed by Satan, a number of colorful explanations. Others say he's just a bit eccentric (or tries to be, they also say, with skeptical brows and the Wisely Omniscient Eye, voices lowered). And still others look at him like some kind of Buddhist manifestation of the messiah – but that number is happily few, which makes it easier for him to escape when they swarm.

Well. He likes to say they swarm. Jack Kelly is absurdly fond of himself. "Why not," he asks in the voice of a sage, "when there are so many versions of me to love?" He's met largely with disapproving stares; but every once in a while, there's a heartfelt murmur of assent by a leftover beatnik who'll jam poetically about him later at the local coffee shop.

Jack Kelly says, however, that no one really understands the *Beats* as well as they think. Did they know Allen Ginsberg, have drinks with him and Pete every Tuesday night, try and fail with him to invoke the spirit of William Blake by means of scholarly acid trips? *No*.

It's really best not to get Jack started on Beat life. Or the subject of Allen's taste in ties.

Life as a Roman peasant farmer wasn't quite as inspirational as the beat path of the 50s and 60s. He prefers to gloss over most of it until he reaches the point where his neighbor *thrashed his fence* through the crafty use of rabid cattle. The neighbor denied any such affiliation with rabid animalia, but Jack says, "The ass thought he could fool me – *me*, the only farmer in the village who bothered to learn to read, so obviously I was smarter and there was an *eye for an eye*, my friend, I tell you what." Jack likes to claim he took the cattle hostage and trained them to assassinate the aforementioned neighbor. But this was, naturally, all before the Romans decided it would be jivin' to write things down, like history, for example – so there is no hard evidence to corroborate this story.

There usually isn't, with Jack.

firefly dance

ten million fireflies
tonight they come dancing
they teach me their waltz
and their twinkling minuet
while we swirl as constellations do
across the black and blue

ten million tiny sighs
tonight they come softly
they remind me to breathe
is to miss you forever
while i lie quiet in my bed
i should be dancing instead

ten million little tears
tonight they come swimming
they want me to drown
in what no longer lives here
but i dry my tired eyes
i'd rather dance with fireflies

swordplay

bear with me
this one's hard to get down
 I'm never sure from up here
how to strike like I mean it
with my pad of paper
and my excellent skill with an ink-tipped blade
 I'm never sure from here
how to aim for your heart

 if you have one

Sleeping Beauty

Like a dream lover, I reach for you,
but my touch falls shy of your glowing skin.
To want you is to drown in the sea
of what can never be.

Do not follow me into the dark;
I can't bear to pull you under.
Live your life, free of pain, free of curses.

Love another.

rain-touched (thunder children)

little miracles of rain-touched skin
chased after mine
felt like swimming starlight
—come up for air
 oh never

I told you no, but you felt yes
with your hand on my heart
no, I won't go, I won't stay, I don't know
yes, take from me this bruised and beating thing

you held it, quiet in the breezeway
of our summer storm
while I breathed violent sky
and all its electricity

you kissed me, then

 and all the rain
 and all the stars

came down

once in the woods

it came with a song and the
trembling of trees
as it filtered down all white and gold and green
a swimming photosynthesis
and it gave me air
 breath
 warmth
 and sight

like the tiniest child I
hungered for it, wished to grow
 shoot up like a star gone wrong
and fly, fly, fly off to heaven
with feet in mud and moss
and head in cloud and sky

I reached for it then
took it with a tiny child's greed
felt the precious glow in my palm
watched my hand turn this way
 and that way
twirling in the whispering gyre of all

this light.

me and the dragon

we waltzed to the hiss
of a slow breathing fire
my feet were unsure and
my arms lonesome longing
till he filled them with warmth and a
1-2-3 *pulse*
me and the dragon
the dark devil prince
we were sweet and forgiven
our sins

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BIOGRAPHY

Margot C. Jones was born in and grew up around the Austin, Texas area. Despite living there all her life, she feels most at home in London, England, walking the streets alone. She began her Thesis Project in 2009. After several years away from school to be with family, she felt incredibly fortunate to be welcomed back to the Plan II Honors program to finish what she started. Special thanks go to David Wevill, who walked alongside her on this road, and to Matt Valentine, who helped her find the finish line.